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More Than Shelter: Activism and Community in San Francisco Public Housing

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More Than Shelter

ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY IN
SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC HOUSING

Amy L. Howard

A Quadrant Book



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Introduction

ON A SUNNY DAY IN MAY 2009, I SAT INSIDE A COZY LIVING ROOM in the Valencia Gardens public housing development in San Francisco's Mission District and reconnected with a tenant I had first met years earlier. Much had changed in Anita Ortiz's life and in the built environment of Valencia Gardens since our first meeting: after serving in a prominent leadership role in the tenants' association for many years before Valencia Gardens was redeveloped with federal HOPE VI (Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere) funds, Anita had fought to return to the new development after it reopened in 2006. Many of her previous neighbors did not return, and the "old VG community," along with the sixty-one-year-old buildings, had been dismantled and replaced by modern apartments and new neighbors. Anita struggled to find her place in the new Valencia Gardens while holding fast to the ideal that community means "working together with everyone to restore the neighborhood" with "all neighbors coming together."¹ Not long after she moved back in, Anita's husband passed away. Her grief was evident, and I felt sheepish sitting down to hear her views on the redeveloped Valencia Gardens. My privilege as a white, middle-class academic was mediated only by my awareness of it and my sense that our conversation might in some ways be mutually beneficial. Anita wanted to be heard and over the years had demonstrated excitement that her experiences were of interest to people outside her community. Tenants' stories, including Anita's, were a critical component in helping me understand community formation and the ways residents experienced locally implemented federal policy in San Francisco public housing.

Like millions of other people and many of the tenants I met, Anita Ortiz was happy to call San Francisco home. With its blend of natural beauty from the ocean and the bay, its rolling hills and impressive architecture, its unique neighborhoods and diverse population, San Francisco is a city beloved by residents and tourists alike. Its political

and social reputation as “liberal” enhances or detracts from the city’s reputation depending on whom you talk to. Taken together, the richness of the cityscape, its appeal to tourists, and the city’s status as a “progressive” locale provides a compelling foundation for an examination of the history of public housing. In the midst of the nation’s current economic turmoil and the dismantling of the traditional public housing program, investigating the history and persistence of the federally supported program that aims to provide affordable housing for low-income Americans takes on new urgency. Understanding the federal government’s public housing policies, the variation of local implementation in cities and even in particular neighborhoods, and the specific experiences and actions of tenants deepen in turn—and in critical ways—our understanding of the intersections among housing, race, ethnicity, activism, and community formation.

More Than Shelter focuses on the concept of community as both an ideological construct—as deployed by the San Francisco Housing Authority (SFHA) through its practices and policies—and a complex, contingent process whereby tenants formed relationships as part of a shared identity. Under this dual approach, public housing in San Francisco becomes a site for reexamining segregation, integration, inclusion, exclusion, and racially and ethnically diverse living environments in the West during the second half of the twentieth century. Focusing on three developments—Valencia Gardens, Ping Yuen, and North Beach Place—I investigate the ways tenants created communities that mattered to them out of rented, federally subsidized public housing units, and I analyze the various modes of activism they used to sustain and strengthen those communities.

The history of the Valencia Gardens, Ping Yuen, and North Beach Place communities demonstrates a range of activist strategies used by tenants to create change. Low-income Americans are often written off in terms of their civic participation: in the United States, voting is privileged as the ultimate exercise in civic duty, and voting rates among this population tend to be lower than average. A more capacious definition of civic responsibility and action challenges this view. Numerous tenants at these public housing projects responded to federal policies and local implementation and practices with different forms of activism. Through what I call “affective activism” at Valencia Gardens

(that is, activism focused on intentional relationships and community building to fortify residents in the face of shared challenges), coalition building across sectors at Ping Yuen, and cross-racial and cross-ethnic mobilization efforts at North Beach Place, public housing tenants in San Francisco engaged in wide-ranging activist practices to improve their public housing developments. Understanding the conditions that fostered tenant activism, as well as the nuances of the tenants' activist strategies, in turn furthers our understanding of civic engagement and the politicization and empowerment of low-income tenants that occurred through living in public housing.² Through their efforts, tenants' civic engagement shaped both the public housing program and tenants themselves.

Ultimately, the persistence of public housing in San Francisco—particularly in the increasingly sought-after tourist and gentrifying neighborhoods of the Mission District, Chinatown, and North Beach—and redevelopment efforts in the twenty-first century raise important questions, cautions, and possibilities regarding the supply, design, location, and investment in affordable housing in the United States. As public housing is refashioned into mixed-income neighborhoods through public-private partnerships, the push to deconcentrate poverty must include more than simply a nod to the relationships, social ties, and activist connections that low-income tenants have forged in public housing. Finding ways not only to honor but also to incorporate and strengthen these vital networks in redeveloped public housing is essential to building vibrant communities. Understanding the challenges faced by tenants in this study and their strategies for change over time provides some insights that might allow for the creation of the “decent home and suitable living environment” in future public housing that was promised in the Housing Act of 1949.

In the last twenty years, scholars have produced a wealth of important studies on public housing in the United States.³ These texts have explored federal policies, local implementation, large-scale failures, and occasional successes and have provided rich local studies of public housing in Chicago; Baltimore; Boston; Philadelphia; St. Louis; New York; Atlanta; Detroit; Washington, DC; Los Angeles; and elsewhere. From expert policy analysis, to rigorous histories of the New York City, Chicago, and Boston Housing Authorities, to microstudies

that include the importance of architectural design and the architects themselves, public housing has received much-deserved attention. Over the past decade, scholars Rhonda Y. Williams, Roberta M. Feldman, Susan Stall, Sudhir Venkatesh, Lawrence Vale, John Baranski, and others have increasingly focused on tenants' roles in shaping public housing, advocating for improved policies and practices, and demanding a better living environment for themselves and others.⁴

More Than Shelter builds on this work by expanding the analysis of public housing to the West, an underrepresented region in the literature. It also seeks to further our understanding of the role of community, activism, and leadership in public housing developments in the context of particular neighborhoods. Unlike the midwestern and eastern high-rise projects populated primarily by African Americans that many scholars and the media have focused on, public housing in San Francisco has been architecturally and demographically diverse. Valencia Gardens, Ping Yuen, and North Beach Place are unique among the public housing projects studied so far because of their location in mixed-use urban areas that over time came to attract locals and tourists. The influence of race and racial politics on public housing in Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, and New York City is generally well understood; the narrative of black occupancy and white opposition is also well established. But the ways in which the racial and ethnic diversity of the West shaped public housing in the second half of the twentieth century has not yet been explored in depth. In contrast to the large-scale residential segregation cemented in many cities across the United States in the twentieth century, San Francisco's Valencia Gardens and North Beach Place offer rare sites of interracial, cross-cultural residential living. Ping Yuen in Chinatown, intentionally segregated first as a Chinese American project and later as an Asian American development, also puts pressure on the prevailing black-white binary in public housing history.⁵ Valencia Gardens, Ping Yuen, and North Beach Place push the boundaries of our scholarly and popular understanding of the public housing program and how it worked in a particular place over time.

More Than Shelter probes the intersection between the institutional history and implementation of public housing and the lived experience of tenants. By combining the oftentimes disparate approaches of institutional and social history with an attention to public policy,

urban design, and spatial politics, I use an interdisciplinary approach to examine the complex intersections among plans, policies, practices, and lived experience in San Francisco public housing over seven decades. Oral histories, newspaper articles, San Francisco Housing Authority Commission meeting minutes, San Francisco Housing Authority annual reports, maps, architectural plans, photographs, letters, participant observation, interviews, and other archival materials inform this interdisciplinary microstudy of three public housing communities.

The imperfections of oral history methodology for fully understanding the past are evident here. Memories fade and change. Life histories are narrated to emphasize a particular point of view. Identity and power dynamics can shape the interview process, as I experienced through my research.⁶ Nonetheless, this method gave me insights I would not have gleaned from archival materials alone. The conversations and interactions I had with public housing tenants, such as Anita Ortiz, helped form my arguments; they have also deepened and broadened the book's investigation of community formation, civic engagement and activism, and leadership. Ultimately, the oral histories surfaced the buried stories and daily interactions that demonstrated the complex webs of trust and the importance of relationships within these public housing communities.

As San Francisco embraces the aim of redeveloping all its public housing, based in part on the federal HOPE VI model, understanding the history of public housing in some of the city's most beloved neighborhoods is particularly relevant. Public housing is intermingled with the broad currents of social and economic change within neighborhoods, the city, and the region; to understand the complexities of these currents in public housing in San Francisco, this study explores tenants' relationships with each other, with the built environment of the project, with the neighborhood, and with the state. *More Than Shelter* further analyzes the leadership successes and failures of SFHA administrators and tenants within the context of the challenges cities faced in the twentieth century. Such history offers important lessons for shaping successful public housing and affordable housing programs in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1 traces the tumultuous institutional history of the San Francisco Housing Authority from its inception in 1938 to its attempts to improve its reputation and credibility in the 1990s, with particular

attention both to the SFHA's push to impose a specific vision of community onto public housing and to its repeated leadership failures. Steeped in the language and ideology of white, middle-class moral superiority and enacted through racial and ethnic segregation and other regulations restricting tenant organizing, the agency's notion of community clashed with San Francisco's image as an inclusive, welcoming city. The SFHA became increasingly corrupt during the late 1960s and 1970s and by the mid-1980s was one of the country's most troubled housing authorities. Tenants across the city suffered as a result. In recent years, the SFHA has tried to regain the respect of the city and the federal government by redeveloping troubled projects through the HOPE VI program, with indeterminate results, as I discuss in chapters 2 and 4. The legacy of the SFHA's failed leadership, management, and racist practices continues to reverberate even as the city works on a major overhaul of the public housing program.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 present case studies to examine the ways in which tenants reacted to federal housing policies, to local implementation of these policies, and to the SFHA's definition of, and actions in, their communities. These chapters highlight the perspectives of tenants and tease out how they defined and created communities. They describe the modes of activism tenants employed to protect themselves and their neighbors, and they show which strategies succeeded and which failed over time. The tenants' varied experiences living in public housing challenge the stereotypes of who lives in public housing, what it is like living there, and why residents stay. The residents who shared their stories continually voiced their frustration with being stigmatized for living in the "projects." My aim is to unsettle these generalizations about "what kind of people" live in public housing while also acknowledging the hardships faced, and at times perpetuated, by public housing tenants themselves. These narratives create a framework for analyzing different definitions of community and the functions of activist strategies in federally subsidized housing. They also illuminate the varied and changing views of home and community that exist among tenants—as well as between tenants and neighbors living near public housing. These differing and at times contested definitions have had a critical impact on the image and reality of public housing.

Chapter 2 examines the Valencia Gardens project in the Mission District. Built by the SFHA in 1943 despite an outcry from district residents, the project has remained a contested space for six decades. Over the years, tenants have endured crime sprees and the scorn of district neighbors and the city as their project morphed from what the SFHA viewed as a “model” community into what outsiders saw as an anti-public space—a dangerous and stigmatized place they wanted to avoid. Residents living in the project, however, formed relationships and came together to construct a community much different than what the SFHA envisioned. Born out of a need for relationships and assistance and, ironically, nurtured by the stigma separating tenants from the neighborhood, this community has aided and encouraged many tenants over the years. By creating bonds through the tenants’ association and informal networks, many residents in this racially diverse project have seized psychological ownership of their public housing apartments and used “affective activism” to improve Valencia Gardens.⁷

Chapter 3 explores the history of the Ping Yuen project in Chinatown. Ping Yuen primarily housed Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans, mirroring the surrounding neighborhood. This project complicates the historiography on race and public housing, which has focused mainly on the segregation of black tenants. Ping Yuen remained segregated for most of the twentieth century, and neither tenants nor the SFHA pushed for integration there. Welcomed by the district and praised locally, nationally, and internationally, the post-World War II Ping Yuen housing project demonstrates the importance of community ties between project residents and the surrounding community as well as the impact of cross-sector coalition building. By forming an active tenants’ association, Ping Yuen residents, many of whom were immigrants from China, challenged the SFHA through petitions and rent strikes to create a safer project. Forming strong ties within the project and a robust coalition between the tenants’ association and district social service organizations, Ping Yuen residents have worked to improve their homes and the greater Chinatown community. The cooperation between social service agencies and these tenants provides a successful example of the possibilities for sustaining livable public housing environments through cross-sector alliances. These strong ties, yielding decades of social service support, along

with the consistent, strong leadership and activism of the tenants' association, contributed to the health of the Ping Yuen community over time. Unfortunately, popular discourse about the project has tended to attribute this success to the ethnicity of the residents—a tendency that both perpetuates the “model minority” stereotype and overlooks the importance of all of the factors that worked together to provide a strong foundation for Ping Yuen public housing over the years. Although it is perhaps easy to view Ping Yuen's success simply through the model minority lens, it is this complex set of factors, I argue, that provided a strong foundation for Ping Yuen public housing over the years.

North Beach Place, the case study in chapter 4, raises questions about the politics of development and redevelopment and examines the difficulties of community formation in a multiracial and multiethnic housing project. The history of North Beach Place demonstrates the importance of understanding the impact of regional racial and ethnic patterns and attitudes on public housing. As a result of a 1952 lawsuit brought against the SFHA by African American applicants, North Beach Place became the first racially integrated public housing complex in the city. These activists' efforts contributed to the civil rights movement in meaningful ways. Decades later, tenants crossed racial and ethnic lines to fight against the forces of redevelopment and the specter of being forced out of a thriving neighborhood. Located on prime real estate in one of San Francisco's most popular tourist districts, North Beach Place unsettles the image of public housing through its look and location, and it challenges assumptions about the way gentrification operates. Through a multiracial and multiethnic alliance, tenants successfully maintained the number of public housing units at North Beach Place in the shadow of gentrification and economic development efforts in the area.

Taken together, the histories of Valencia Gardens, Ping Yuen, and North Beach Place demonstrate that for many tenants, public housing has served as more than shelter. Through the formation of communities within public housing and the use of a range of activist strategies, residents have found ways to cope with the shared and individual problems in their respective projects. They have also collectively organized for change. The communities studied here resist—and

in some ways disrupt—the declension model of public housing that shows public housing in steady decline since the 1950s. *More Than Shelter* demonstrates how groups of low-income residents refashioned federal housing, rebuked stigmas, and fought for a modicum of control to create homes for themselves and their families. Although problems with other tenants, with district neighbors, and with the state did plague residents over the years, many came together and deployed a variety of activist strategies to improve public housing for themselves and their neighbors. Living in convenient locations in San Francisco even as increasing numbers of low-income families left the city in search of cheaper rents, tenants living at Valencia Gardens, Ping Yuen, and North Beach Place prior to HOPE VI redevelopment endured in important but understudied ways.

A brief conclusion examines San Francisco's bold vision for public housing redevelopment in the twenty-first century. Eschewing decades of leadership and management failures within the SFHA, and recognizing the limits of federal assistance available to transform distressed public housing, the city has embarked on an ambitious plan to create vibrant, healthy communities where long-neglected public housing developments now stand. Echoes of tenants' activism reverberate in the vision, mission, and aims of the HOPE SF program, as the city works to revitalize public housing amid an affordable housing shortage and to resuscitate its public housing legacy. Examining this new program through the lens of the past demonstrates the possibilities for public housing in the twenty-first century.